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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR TRAVELS TO VOLTA REGION: REFUGEES, POVERTY AND NEGLECT

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: On February 15-16, Ambassador traveled to Ghana's Volta Region to meet the Regional Minister, make a donation to a USAID-funded school literacy program, highlight USG research on Leishmaniasis, and discuss refugee, Amcit and political issues with local contacts. The Volta Region is poor and in many ways neglected. Although it has some human rights challenges (especially as a source and destination for human trafficking), it appears to have done well at absorbing close to 12,000 Togolese refugees. End summary.

¶2. (U) On February 15-16, Ambassador and PolChief traveled to Ghana's Volta Region, the mountainous eastern portion of the country. She donated audiovisual equipment to a "Breakthrough for Literacy School" funded by USAID. She visited a village in which the U.S. Naval Marine Research Unit (in collaboration with the Noguchi Memorial Institute for Medical Research and the Ghana Health Services) has identified cases of Leishmaniasis, a parasitic disease transmitted through sand flies. She thanked the local chiefs for their cooperation and highlighted to the media USG interest in combating the disease. In addition, the Ambassador met with about twenty Amcits and Peace Corps Volunteers, as well as the Regional Minister, UNHCR officials, NDC party representatives and members of civil society.

Regional Minister on Development, Ethnic Disputes

¶3. (U) Poverty and lack of education are the major challenges of the Volta Region, Regional Minister Samuel Kofi Dzamesi told Ambassador. Much of the Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) funds expected for Volta Region have not been allocated, he said. Governance is difficult because the region is dominated by the opposition National Democratic Congress (NDC) party, which does not want to be seen as helping the NPP government. (Note: the region is home to former President Rawlings and 21 of its 22 parliamentary seats are NDC. End note.)

¶4. (U) According to Dzamesi, the Volta Region suffers from numerous chieftaincy and ethnic disputes, with 18 ongoing chieftaincy and ethnic conflicts. Nomadic Fulani herdsmen from Burkina Faso, Mali and Togo, often heavily armed, also cause significant destruction in the region and have resisted efforts to control them. The Regional Minister had met some of the Fulani chiefs, who said they would accommodate his concerns, although he was concerned that Fulanis have the potential to cause more conflict in the future.

Region Ignored

¶5. (SBU) The NDC Regional Chairman and three NDC Members of

Parliament from the area told Ambassador that the NPP government largely ignores the Volta Region because it is the bastion of the opposition. Power supplies are erratic, despite the proximity of hydroelectric power from the Volta Dam. Roads conditions are poor, with road projects at times abandoned. The region's single industry, a textile mill begun during the Nkrumah period, has closed because of obsolete equipment and global competition. They complained about pervasive corruption in regional government contracts.

¶6. (SBU) In a separate lunch, NGO representatives concurred that the area is suffering from poverty and neglect. There are no universities and few sources of employment. Young people in the region are cynical about government and want to get out of Ghana, they said. The NGO reps noted that the region has significant human rights problems, including trafficking in persons (within the region and to the region's fishing villages from other parts of Ghana), and discrimination against people living with HIV/AIDS and physical handicaps.

Refugees Assimilated

¶7. (U) UNHCR Regional Office Director Anicat Ndayaisaba and his staff concurred that refugees have been absorbed into the Volta Region, without a single incident of trouble. The Togolese refugees are helping themselves, sometimes farming land given to them by local communities. One third of refugee children are in schools taught by volunteer Togolese refugee teachers. Ndayaisaba told Ambassador that UNHCR's main challenge is providing adequate medical care, especially in remote areas (Note: the 11,500 Togolese refugees who fled Togo for the Volta Region in 2005 are scattered in 114 locations in a 400 kilometer area. End note.) Food rations are irregular, although adequate at the moment. UNHCR plans to do a detailed survey of the Togolese refugee population in the Volta Region in April, which will be used to issue the refugees identity cards.

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¶8. (U) While the Regional Minister was initially frustrated about the refugee situation, he has become more cooperative and welcoming, according to UNHCR reps. Regional Minister Dzemsi told Ambassador the refugee situation in the Volta Region is "manageable" and that the refugees are living peacefully with their Ghanaian hosts. He has been working with UNHCR to improve the ability of local towns and villages to absorb refugees.

Comment

¶9. (U) The beautiful Volta Region reminded us of Ghana's poverty outside a handful of cities. The region has major tourist potential, but with few jobs and poor infrastructure, it seems largely ignored. The Peace Corps has made an obvious impact in the region and everywhere we went contacts praised PCVs (and wanted more of them). In addition, the positive reception we received at the school, NAMRU village and elsewhere underscored the significant good will toward the United States among Ghanaians.

BRIDGEWATER